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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, FR, PINT

SUBJECT: FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE -- FEBRUARY

1976

SUMMARY. ON THE SURFACE AT LEAST, FRANCE GAVE THE IMPRESSION OF BEING TOTALLY CAUGHT UP IN THINGS POLITICAL DURING THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY. NEWSPAPERS, RADIO AND TELEVISION REPORTING WERE DOMINATED BY THE FEBRUARY 4-7 FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY (PCF) CONGRESS, THE AFTERMATH OF TWO INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST CONCLAVES AND ADVANCE ANALYSIS OF THE MARCH CANTONAL CONTESTS. TOWARD THE END OF THE MONTH THE MAJORITY LAUNCHED ITS LONG-AWAITED "COUNTER ATTACK", FOLLOWING SEVERAL WEEKS OF RELATIVE SILENCE IN THE FACE OF MEDIA PREOCCUPATION WITH THE OPPOSITION. NEVERTHELESS, MUCH OF WHAT TRANSPRIRED WAS OF ONLY FLEETING SIGNIFICANCE.

POLITICAL JOCKEYING HAD UNDOUBTEDLY BEGUN IN ANTICIPATION OF THE APPROACHING ELECTORAL SEASON (MARCH CANTONALS, 1977 MUNICIPALS AND 1978 LEGISLATIVE CONTESTS), BUT IT SEEMED A PHENOMENON OF ALMOST EXCLUSIVE INTEREST TO THE PARIS POLITICAL CLASS. THIS WAS PARTICULARLY THE CASE REGARDING THE SUBSTANTIAL PUBLICITY ACCORDED THE CANTONAL ELECTIONS. THE CONTESTS, WHICH TRADITIONALLY PASS WITH BARELY A YAWN, WERE BEING BUILT UP BY LEFT POLITICIANS AS A GREAT NATIONAL PULSE-TAKING. ALLIED WITH THE LEFT WERE POLITICAL PUNDITS WHO SEEMINGLY WERE SETTING UP TO DRAIN EVERY OUNCE OF COMMENTARY OUT OF THE PROCEEDINGS.

ONE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION WAS THE "HAIG AFFAIR". REACTION TO GENERAL HAIG'S REPORTED COMMENTS REGARDING COMMUNIST PARTICIPATION IN NATO GOVERNMENTS AS WELL AS REACTION TO EARLIER EMBASSY REMARKS TO PS FIGURES ALONG SIMILAR LINES INDICATED THAT PERCEIVED THREATS TO FRENCH NATIONALISM REMAIN AN EXPLOITABLE ISSUE. BUT BY THE END OF THE MONTH, AND IN SPITE OF THE HOOPLA ON ALL SIDES, THE OVERALL IMPRESSION WAS THAT THE AVERAGE FRENCHMAN WAS WITHHOLDING JUDGMENT ON WHAT -- IF ANYTHING -- IT ALL HAD MEANT. END SUMMARY.

1. CANTONALS APPROACH -- MAJORITY ATTACKS: AS MONTHS
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GO, FEBRUARY HAS NEVER BEEN MUCH FOR SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL HAPPENINGS. THE SPRING NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SESSION DOES NOT OPEN UNTIL EARLY APRIL AND MOST FRENCH FAMILIES ARE MORE CONCERNED WITH SCHOOL VACATIONS AND SKI HOLIDAYS THAN WITH THE DOINGS OF THE PARIS POLITICAL CLASS. NEVERTHELESS FEBRUARY 1976 WAS, SUPERFICIALLY AT LEAST, A VERY ACTIVE POLITICAL MONTH. MUCH OF WHAT HAPPENED WAS RELATED -- DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY -- TO THE UPCOMING

MARCH CANTONAL ELECTIONS (PARIS 5779). THE OPPOSITION MOUNTED A MAJOR CAMPAIGN TO CONVINCE THE FRENCH VOTER THAT, IN CONTRAST TO PREVIOUS YEARS, THE 1976 CANTONALS WOULD BE FRAUGHT WITH NATIONAL POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE. THE GOVERNMENT DISPUTED THIS ANALYSIS, PROBABLY BECAUSE OF ITS FEARS THAT THE LEFT WOULD PICK UP GROUND IN THE CANTONALS. NEVERTHELESS, THE GOVERNMENT MAY HAVE INADVERTENTLY INFLATED THE CANTONALS' IMPORTANCE IN THE EYES OF MANY FRENCH BY CHOOSING FEBRUARY TO LAUNCH A PARTICULARLY BITING COUNTER-ATTACK AGAINST THE OPPOSITION.

2. MITTERRAND -- EVERYONE'S FAVORITE TARGET: IN MOST CASES, SOCIALIST FIRST SECRETARY FRANCOIS MITTERRAND WAS THE TARGET. PRIME MINISTER CHIRAC EXCORIATED HIM FOR "IRRESPONSIBILITY" IN ALIGNING HIS PARTY WITH THE COM-

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MUNISTS, FOR "ISOLATING" FRENCH SOCIALISTS FROM MAJORITY EUROPEAN SOCIALIST THINKING AND FOR ADVOCATING ECONOMIC POLICIES THAT WOULD DESTROY THE FRENCH ECONOMY. MINISTER OF FINANCE FOURCADE FOLLOWED UP WITH AN ANALYSIS ALLEGING THAT SOCIALIST ECONOMIC PROPOSALS WOULD PRODUCE A DISASTROUS BUDGET DEFICIT. TOWARD THE END OF THE MONTH FOURCADE AGREED TO DEBATE MITTERAND MARCH 2 ON TELEVISION (PARIS 6567). MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR PONIATOWSKI ALSO GOT INTO THE ACT BY CHARGING MITTERAND WITH IMPROPER USE OF GOVERNMENT CLASSIFIED MATERIALS IN PREPARATION FOR HIS FEBRUARY TRIP TO ALGERIA (PARIS 6155).

3. THE MAJORITY HELD NO MONOPOLY IN ATTACKS ON MITTERAND DURING FEBRUARY. THE COMMUNISTS, SEEMINGLY ANXIOUS TO REASSERT THEMSELVES WITHIN THE LEFT FOLLOWING THEIR HIGHLY PUBLICIZED EARLY FEBRUARY PARTY CONGRESS (PARIS 4793), ALSO WENT AFTER THE PS LEADER. PCF SECRETARY GENERAL MARCHAIS HIT MITTERAND FOR HIS WILLINGNESS TO PRESENT HIMSELF AS THE "LEADER" OF THE LEFT IN HIS DEBATE WITH FOURCADE AND SAID THAT THE WHOLE THING SMELLED OF "COLLUSION". (IN A PRESS CONFERENCE FOLLOWING THE DEBATE, MARCHAIS TERMED MITTERAND'S ANALYSIS DEFENDING COMMON PROGRAM ECONOMIC PROPOSALS "VERY WEAK"). MITTERAND ALSO DREW CRITICISM FROM MARCHAIS BECAUSE OF HIS REFUSAL TO WITHDRAW PS CANDIDATES FROM FIRST-ROUND CANTONAL CONTESTS WHERE THE COMMUNIST WAS THE INCUMBENT AND NO MAJORITY CANDIDATE HAD PRESENTED HIMSELF. MAJORITY ATTACKS, AND TO A LESSER DEGREE THOSE OF THE COM-

MUNISTS, JARRED THE PS. SOME PARTY MEMBERS WERE SAYING THAT THE PARTY LEADERSHIP HAD GROWN DANGEROUSLY COMPLACENT. OTHERS ARE GOING SO FAR AS TO SAY THAT THE PS HAD GONE LOOKING FOR TROUBLE IN MITTERRAND'S VISIT TO ALGERIA AND GOT JUST WHAT IT DESERVED. IN FEBRUARY, THE PS AGAIN LEARNED THAT CHIRAC AND PONIATOWSKI CAN HIT BACK HARD -- AND EFFECTIVELY. ALSO DURING THE MONTH, THERE WERE SIGNS THAT SOCIALIST PREPARATIONS FOR THE 1977 MUNICIPAL CONTESTS WERE NOT GOING WELL. THE PS IS CONCERNED THAT GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO BUILD UP RIGHT SOCIALIST GROUPS, SUCH AS ERIC HINTERMANN'S FEDERATION

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OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATS, WILL BLUNT ITS MUNICIPAL PUSH. SOCIALISTS ARE ALSO WORRIED THAT ALLEGED GOVERNMENT GERRYMANDERING OF MUNICIPAL DISTRICTS WILL PLACE THE CONTROL OF CERTAIN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS BEYOND THEIR REACH. TO DATE, PS AND PCF HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO AGREE ON COMMON TACTICS TO ATTACK GERRYMANDERING.

4. A SILVER LINING OF SORTS: NEVERTHELESS, THE MONTH WAS NOT ALL GLOOM FOR THE SOCIALISTS. PARTY MEMBERS COULD CONSOLE THEMSELVES WITH THE REALIZATION THAT THE PS HAD CLEARLY BECOME THE ORGANIZATION TO BEAT IN TERMS OF MOMENTUM AND VOTER LOYALTY. MOREOVER, COMMUNIST POLLING GAINS (SOFRES REPORTED A FOUR PERCENT JUMP, FROM 31 TO 35 PERCENT, IN "GOOD OPINIONS" OF PCF) MAY GIVE THE PS A BOOST BY INDICATING INCREASED PUBLIC ACCEPTABILITY FOR ITS PCF ALLY. SOCIALIST PROSPECTS SEEMED ENCOURAGING AS THE CANTONALS APPROACHED AND THE PARTY WAS ENGAGED IN A SIZEABLE EFFORT TO ENSURE THAT CANTONAL RESULTS WOULD REFLECT PS POLLING GAINS. MITTERRAND'S DECISION TO CONTEST CANTONAL SEATS HELD BY COMMUNISTS SUGGESTED THAT THE PARTY WAS NOT GOING TO ALLOW ANY FREE RIDES TO A PCF LEADERSHIP ANXIOUS TO CAPITALIZE NOT ONLY THE POST-CONGRESS COMMUNIST "NEW LOOK" BUT ALSO ON PS STRENGTH.

5. THE MAJORITY: WITHIN THE PRESIDENTIAL MAJORITY, PREPARATIONS FOR CANTONAL CONTESTS ALSO DOMINATED THE MONTH. PRIME MINISTER CHIRAC'S DESCRIPTION OF THE CANTONALS AS NON-POLITICAL WAS ROUNDLY IGNORED BY MAJORITY FORMATIONS BUSILY ORGANIZING TO KEEP LEFTIST GAINS TO A MINIMUM. IN SOME CASES, WHERE MAJORITY CHANCES WERE NIL, THERE WERE AGREEMENTS TO BACK THE SOCIALIST CANDIDATE, OVER HIS COMMUNIST OPPONENT, AS THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS. IN THIS CONNECTION, INDEPENDENT REPUBLICAN LEADER JACQUES DOMINATI WAS EVEN QUOTED AS SAYING THAT SHOULD 1978 SEE A LEFTIST VICTORY IN THE LEGISLATIVE CONTESTS, THE IR WOULD STAND BY THE SOCIALISTS IN

ORDER TO "PROTECT LIBERTY".

6. MORE UDR GROANS: THERE WERE INCREASING SIGNS DURING FEBRUARY THAT THE GAULLIST PARTY (UDR) IS IN SERIOUS
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DIFFICULTY. POLLS ONLY ACCORDED IT SOME 15 PERCENT OF POTENTIAL VOTER SUPPORT, THUS SEEMINGLY RELEGATING WHAT WAS ONLY RECENTLY FRANCE'S STRONGEST PARTY TO FOURTH POSITION AMONG THE NATION'S POLITICAL FORMATIONS. THE

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PROBLEM SEEMS TO BE ONE OF DIRECTION. PRIME MINISTER CHIRAC NO LONGER APPEARS TO HAVE THE TIME TO DEVOTE TO PARTY AFFAIRS AND THE NOMINAL PARTY HEAD, ANDRE BORD, IS REGARDED AS INCAPABLE OF GIVING THE UDR THE DYNAMISM IT SO BADLY LACKS. IN THE FACE OF WHAT THEY VIEW AS AN INCREASING TENDENCY BY CHIRAC TO TIE THE UDR EVER CLOSER TO Giscard's COATTAILS, THE BARONS (DEBRE, SANGUINETTI, POUJADE AND COUVE DE MURVILLE) ARE INCREASINGLY REGARDING THEMSELVES AS A BESIEGED MINORITY IN THE PARTY WHICH THEY HELPED FOUND. THERE IS GROWING TALK AMONG GAULLISTS THAT DIJON MAYOR ROBERT POUJADE MAY REPLACE BORD IN AN EFFORT TO STNP THE SKID, BUT CLEARLY CONSIDERABLY MORE THAN A SHUFFLING IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WILL BE REQUIRED TO SHAKE THE PARTY FROM ITS CURRENT DOLDRUMS.

7. IR MOMENTUM: ON THE BRIGHTER SIDE WITHIN THE MAJORITY THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLICANS SEEM TO BE FARING WELL. VIGOROUS LEADERSHIP BY PONIATOWSKI, DOMINATI AND FOURCADE, ALONG WITH A POLITICAL STRATEGY THAT HAS REAPED BENEFITS FROM Giscard's CAMPAIGN TO "PRESIDENTIALIZE" THE MAJORITY (PARIS 6654) COMBINED TO MAKE THE IR CLEARLY THE DOMINANT MAJORITY PARTY DURING FEBRUARY. NEVERTHELESS, CERTAIN DIFFICULTIES EMERGED DURING THE MONTH WHICH COULD OVER TIME LEAD TO SERIOUS PROBLEMS. THESE INVOLVED AN INCREASED TENDENCY BY SOME PARTY LEADERS TO EMPHASIZE REFORM AND EVEN "SOCIAL DEMOCRACY" AS THE PARTY'S MAIN GOAL. IR LEADER AND STATE SECRETARY FOR IMMIGRANT LABOR PAUL DIJOUR MADE SEVERAL PUBLIC REMARKS DURING THE MONTH ALONG THESE LINES WHICH WOULD SEEM CERTAIN TO RAISE HACKLES AMONG THE PARTY'S MORE CONSER-

VATIVE SUPPORTERS.

8. REFORMS? IN GENERAL, WHILE THE MAJORITY WAS GEARING UP IN FEBRUARY TO COUNTER THE OPPOSITION'S PREDOMINANT PLACE IN THE PUBLIC EYE, OBSERVERS WERE STILL WONDERING WHETHER GISCARD'S COALITION COULD GET FRANCE MOVING DOWN THE ROAD TO SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM (PARIS 6654). INTERESTING IN THIS CONNECTION ARE FINDINGS OF A PS SURVEY REVEALING THAT THE GENERAL PUBLIC CONSIDERS THE

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IR AS THE MAJORITY'S LEFT WING WHILE THE UDR REPRESENTS ITS CONSERVATIVE ELEMENTS. THIS HAS RIGHTLY SURPRISED THE PS. THE EXPLANATION MAY LIE IN GISCARD'S REFORM RHETORIC.

9. CONSOLIDATION IN THE CENTER: ELSEWHERE IN THE MAJORITY, TWO CENTRIST PARTIES, JEAN LECANUET'S CENTER DEMOCRATS (CD) AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING JACQUES BARROT'S CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY AND PROGRESS GROUPING (CDP) AGREED TO REUNITE. FORMAL REUNIFICATION WILL OCCUR AT A MAY JOINT CONGRESS. MEANWHILE, SEVERAL CDP LEADERS INCLUDING ONE DEPUTY LEFT THE PARTY FOR THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLICANS. NEVERTHELESS MOST OBSERVERS ARE VIEWING THE CDP-CD LINKUP, COMING ON THE HEELS OF SIMILAR STEPS BY THE RADICAL SOCIALISTS AND CENTER REPUBLICANS, AS A HOPEFUL STEP TOWARD ENDING THE ENERVATING FACTIONALISM THAT HAS PLAGUED THE FRENCH CENTER SINCE THE FOURTH REPUBLIC.

10. "HAIG AFFAIR": IN SPITE OF A GREAT DEAL OF MEDIA PLAY GIVEN TO FEBRUARY POLITICAL EVENTS THERE WAS A FEELING THAT THE AVERAGE FRENCHMAN HAD TAKEN LITTLE NOTICE. MOST EVENTS, SUCH AS THE MARCH 2 MITTERRAND - FOURCADE DEBATE, ENJOYED INTENSE BUT BRIEF PUBLICITY AND QUICKLY RECEDED AS THE WEEKS PASSED. ONE EXCEPTION,

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HOWEVER, WAS THE "HAIG AFFAIR". BEGINNING AT MID-MONTH
WITH GENERAL HAIG'S REPORTED COMMENTS ON COMMUNIST
PARTICIPATION IN NATO GOVERNMENTS, NEWSPAPERS AND POLI-
TICIANS CLOSELY FOLLOWED EMBASSY AND OTHER REACTIONS TO

THE ISSUE. PREDICTABLY THE COMMUNISTS AND GAULLISTS WERE FIRST OFF THE BLOCKS WITH EXPRESSIONS OF OUTRAGE. TOWARD THE END OF THE MONTH THE SOCIALISTS -- PERHAPS TO AVOID BEING OUTFLANKED BY THE PCF -- JOINED THE FRAY BY PUBLICLY REVEALING THAT EMBASSY OFFICERS HAD APPROACHED PARTY LEADERS DURING JANUARY TO REITERATE US POLICY VIS-A-VIS COMMUNIST PARTICIPATION IN WESTERN EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS.

AT MONTH'S END, NEWSPAPERS HAD RELEGATED THE CONTROVERSY TO THEIR INSIDE PAGES. MOREOVER, FOR THE MOMENT AT LEAST, THE OPPOSITION APPEARED TO HAVE MILKED THE ISSUE FOR ALL IT WAS WORTH. THE EXPERIENCE MAKES CLEAR, HOWEVER, THAT PERCEIVED THREATS TO NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY REMAIN AN EXPLOITABLE ISSUE IN TODAY'S FRANCE.

11. OFF WITH HIS HEAD: LAW AND ORDER RECEIVED CONSIDERABLE ATTENTION DURING THE MONTH AS THE RESULT OF A PARTICULARLY EGREGIOUS KIDNAP -- KILLING OF A YOUNG CHILD IN EASTERN FRANCE. PUBLIC OUTRAGE WAS SPLASHED ACROSS NEWSPAPERS AND TELEVISION AND EVEN MINISTER OF JUSTICE LECANUET AND MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR PONIATOWSKI PUBLICLY RECOMMENDED THE GUILLOTINE FOR THE AUTHOR OF THE CRIME. PERHAPS FEARING THAT THE ISSUE WAS GETTING OUT OF CONTROL, PRESIDENT GISCARD, THROUGH AN ELYSEE SPOKESMAN, CALLED LECANUET AND PONIATOWSKI TO HEEL, AND SAID THAT THE MATTER WAS ONE FOR THE COURTS TO DECIDE.

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